

When the Blind See
Psalm 34
Mark 10:46-52
October 25, 2015
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church
Clemson, SC

“What do you want me to do for you?”

Jesus asked Bartimaeus this question. We have heard this before. In last week’s text Jesus asked it of James and John. “What is it you want me to do for you?”

The Wind Bag brothers wanted to sit at the right and left hand of Jesus in his kingdom. They were interested in places of honor for themselves. Jesus was direct with them about not knowing what they were asking for—a future of persecution and disaster, of fear and death. Jesus told them that he was not able to grant their request and then he gave them instruction in how to be a servant of all.

“What do you want me to do for you?”

Bartimaeus, on the other hand, gave Jesus the answer, “My teacher, let me see again.” He was interested in the *present* perhaps so he could see Jesus. And Jesus tells this poor beggar whose name means “son of honor,” that he may “go, that his faith has made him well.” But he doesn’t go. Instead he follows Jesus. His physical blindness was now overcome, but he could see Jesus with his heart before his vision was restored.

The Israelite tradition located the living light in the heart. According to this tradition, the human person consists of three mutually interpenetrating yet distinguishable zones that served as the vehicles for interacting with other persons and things in the human environment: heart-eyes, the zone of emotion fused with thought; mouth-ears, the zone of expressive speech; and the hands- feet, the zone of purposeful action. The heart-eye zone relates to blindness ... In the Semitic idiom “to be blind” means “to be hardened, inflexible, adamant in one’s position.” This kind of obstinate refusal to see, to remain blind, will have serious consequences (see Matt 15:14; 23:16-27). Such figurative blindness was as serious as physical blindness in the ancient world.¹

Jesus knew from Bartimaeus’ answer that his heart could see. After all, when Bartimaeus was shouting to get Jesus’ attention, he was saying, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” For Bartimaeus to call Jesus the Son of David was a recognition of Jesus as the Messiah! Bartimaeus could see Jesus before he was able to behold him. When Bartimaeus follows Jesus, he becomes a disciple of believing without seeing, receiving the gift of sight, and then following the Messiah into Jerusalem to his triumphal entry. And just like Bartimaeus threw off his cloak to run to Jesus, so do the faithful followers of Jesus lay down their cloaks to bid honor and devotion to Jesus, shouting, “Hosanna, Jesus, Son of David. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!”

The difference between James and John, and the blind beggar Bartimaeus is that the brothers’ request was based on fear of their future, but Bartimaeus’ asked believing in the hope of the present—believing in Jesus as the Messiah.

“What do you want me to do for you?” reminds me of “Can you see anything?”

¹ Pilch, John J., “Blindness” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Dictionary, A-C, Vol. 1*, Katherine Doob Sakenfield, ed., (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 2006, 481.

It was a different question from another story about a blind beggar in Mark's gospel in chapter 8. I remember having the eyes of my heart opened upon hearing it in the context of a missions conference. Years ago when I was in college I went to Urbana, IL over Christmas holidays.

One night at worship a missionary shared about her work in Papua, New Guinea. She and another woman worked as translators for Wycliffe Bible Translators. Their mission was to go deep into the wilderness over land and then about five hours by canoe up river to a tribe where the native language had never been recorded on paper. They were first met with suspicion because they were white women, but after their guide had communicated with the chief of the tribe, the women were welcomed into the community. The chief assigned the medicine man to be host to the women.

After some clothes were provided for the medicine man, the women were able to begin the work of learning the language. This involved pointing at things and listening to what the medicine man would say. After a few days the women were able to communicate that they wanted to carve the man's tongue on the banana leave. When he understood this he was most happy. After about a month of writing down the words of many, many things, and actions, the women began translating and chose to use Mark's gospel.

The translators wanted to share their work with the village but first felt it was best to check it with the medicine man. So they began reading Mark's gospel to him. When they came to the story of the blind beggar in Mark 8 where Jesus heals him by spitting on mud and putting it on the man's eyes, the medicine man heard this he leapt up from his chair. He described how he treated the villagers whenever they had eye sickness. He too spit on mud and placed it on their eyes, so he asked the missionaries, "Who is this Great Spitter" that can make people see again? They told him about Jesus who is God. He was overjoyed and made the women wait until he returned. He came back shortly with the chief and told the women to tell the story about the Great Spitter again. So they did and the medicine man shared who Jesus was so the two men were very excited. The chief called all of the elders of the tribe together and told them to bring their families to the meeting area after dinner.

That evening over 60 persons showed up to hear the gospel story of the Great Spitter and then the medicine man told the villagers that the Great Spitter was Jesus and Jesus was God.

That my friends is the power of the gospel — in words that make the blind see. They began to follow in the ways of Jesus as their language was put on the banana leaf.

"What do you want me to do for you?"

Over the last two weeks I have found myself asking this question to persons who have called on the church for assistance. I have learned a lot from Jesus in being so direct. I have learned that folks who really do need help will answer the question. Some are surprised it is asked. I am even surprised that I ask it. For in asking "What do you want me to do for you?" I feel like I am taking a step out on faith, a risk to see how God is calling us to help. And I sometimes wonder if we are able to do what is asked.

Before Jesus asked the question, he listened for the voice that was crying out for mercy. To follow Jesus we are called to listen. Then Jesus stopped. He acknowledged the blind man. In the new Testament when Jesus stops, it is a way for him to get our attention so that we pay attention to what Jesus is doing. Jesus did the opposite of the crowd. He called the person to come nearer, the crowd tried to shush the man's cries.

But some people do not want to be healed. Time, a blessing, or a prayer or simply conversation may be all they desire, but not real healing. Some are comfortable in their pain or condition. Somehow the sickness provides an avenue of contact with others who will offer care for them.

To ask "Do you want to be healed?" can be kind of like asking, "Would you like to get off welfare?" Yes, of course, they do, at one level, but they may have become dependent and are not willing to give up that dependence for something better, even if Jesus would offer it to them.²

I think it is also important for us to consider how we are the church. Where do we find ourselves in this scenario? Are we the blind beggar? Are we Jesus, trying to meet the needs of those around us? Or are we the crowd who silences the cries of the one in need? This is the viewpoint that a commentary from 1951 presents.

"The crowd at Jericho chided the beggar for bringing his troubles to Jesus. To their massive ignorance such things as poverty and affliction had nothing to do with the Master. Crowds in New York, Chicago, London, Moscow, utter the same rebuff when poverty stalks the land, when unemployment goes up, and human life goes down, and men cry out, "These are religious problems; it is the responsibility of the church of Christ to do something about them."³

Today, this might read:

The crowd at Fort Hill chided the beggar for bringing his troubles into the narthex. To their massive indifference such things as racism and gun control had nothing to do with Jesus Christ. Crowds in Easley, Anderson, Seneca and Greenville, utter the same rebuff when racism stalks the land, when children are shot to death at school, when unemployment goes up and mental health care is almost nonexistent for those who need it most, and women cry out, "These are life problems; it is the responsibility of Christians to do something about them."

In our present day to stop and take the time to follow Jesus we are called to ask, "What do you want me to do for you?"

Some persons need only a meal or a tank of gas. Others need to buy groceries for their family since they have small children. Some need a job so they can pay their rent. The needs are endless. But in asking the question, some will determine that they can do something for themselves. Others willingly visit Clemson Community Cares, Our Daily Rest, or the Ripple of One. Still others will need more services than our area can provide. And there will be some who need us to follow Jesus by walking alongside of them for a long time. When we follow Jesus we can give of ourselves to help us see the Other as Jesus sees.

If any of you want to help someone today and see the Other as Jesus sees us all, speak with me after worship. The need is great and the laborers are few. I promise you, when we see Jesus we will follow him.

² [http://www.jesuswalk.com/lessons/18_35-43.htm]

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³ Luccock, Halford E., "Exposition" on "The Gospel According to St. Mark" in *The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VII*, George Arthur Buttrick, Gen Ed., (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1951), 821.